

How Did Christianity Happen?

Mike Bird on the Resurrection

I must first point out here that even though it's a passing comment by Bird and doesn't amount to much of anything in terms of his argument, his understanding of sheol, the Hebrew Bible's word for the place of the dead, is inaccurate. On page 38 he writes '... some kind of shadowy existence in sheol (the Hebrew waiting place of the dead), ...' The Hebrew Bible nowhere indicates, at any juncture, that sheol is some sort of holding tank awaiting emptying in better days. Nor is it portrayed as some sort of 'waiting room'. He's clearly importing a strand of Christian theology regarding sheol here which has absolutely nothing to do with what the Hebrew Bible itself says. Had Bird left out the word 'waiting' he would have been right. I suppose, though, that the cause of this misapprehension isn't to be laid at Bird's feet (I almost wrote, in Bird's nest, but thought better of it) but rather at the feet of the unfortunate fact that too many New Testament scholars are so specialized that they have never actually studied the Hebrew Bible (and vice versa, I might add). They know Paul's use of 'ek' but they couldn't find Song of Solomon in a table of contents.

I'm not simply being cheeky here either. Casey points out in his rejoinder to Bird that one really must read Aramaic in order to rightly understand Jesus. As he remarks, far too few NT scholars do. Over-specialization is the cause.

Back to Bird's argument now regarding the resurrection, on page 41 he writes 'That Jesus was buried seems certain given that the burial story is multiply attested by Mark's account, by the tradition that Paul cites in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, which probably derives from Palestinian Christian circles in the 30's, and also by John's independent tradition'. But of course, as we all learned back in elementary textual criticism, witnesses are weighed, not counted. Students of the Historical Jesus far and wide ignore this simple dictum to their own peril. Since, as we all know, an awful lot of people can be wrong! Just recall all those folk who voted for George Bush in 2000 and then again in 2004. If we follow Bird's methodology and assert the truth-engendering nature of multiple attestation, then the election of Bush as the best possible President was the pinnacle of truthiness. Similarly, if one person has the truth then it doesn't matter if a whole army of witnesses is arrayed in opposition. Gospel witnesses should, therefore, be weighed, and not counted.

Bird now turns to the mustering of 'pieces of evidence [that] count in favor of the empty tomb' (p. 42). Evidence? For the empty tomb? It's a claim that can be made by faith but it can't be 'proven' by its emptiness. This is an especially important point since we don't actually know where the tomb of Jesus was. Hence, how can Bird assert that we can prove that it is empty? It's a perilous path he treads.

To the empty tomb he adds the 'evidence' of the appearances of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels and Paul. He writes, in what really has to be called the most absurd claim in his entire argument, that '... the risen Jesus was seen by individuals and groups that included Jesus' followers, sceptics, unbelievers and even enemies' (p. 44). What? Where exactly do we hear the reports of these sceptics, unbelievers and enemies? Not in the Gospels. There's not a verse nor a line nor a phrase nor a word-pair nor a syllable in any of them from either sceptic, unbeliever, or enemy. The Gospels and Paul are *believers and in the New Testament we have their testimony, not their Evidence that Demands a Verdict!* The others Mike mentions are silent in those pages.

In the second most astonishing claim that Mike makes, he takes a slap at 'minimalists', writing 'I never ceased [sic!] to be amazed that scholars who take a minimalist approach ... appear to suspend their scepticism as they make claims to know the interior mental events and psychological states of the disciples' (p. 46-47). Yet, oh beloved reader, isn't this exactly what Bird has done in his own description of the Historical Jesus? He claims to know what Jesus thought. So isn't this precisely the 'pot calling the kettle black'?

Bird continues 'So we are stuck with the problem of why the disciples believed that their crucified leader was resurrected' (p. 47) to which I reply- 'Why Mike, the answer lies in your own statement- they *believed!*' They had faith. God did indeed raise Jesus from the dead. Can we prove it? Most certainly not. But is it true? Ah, yes, it certainly is. As the old hymn has it, 'You ask me how I know he lives? He lives, within, my heart!'

Finally, after Crossley's response, Mike concludes 'Why is the tradition unanimous in affirming resurrection? One answer that I think remains plausible is that the disciples really believed that they had seen Jesus in physical form after his death' (p. 69). Perhaps, but I wasn't there so I don't know what they saw or experienced. Neither was Crossley and neither was Bird. Indeed, even the most elderly biblioblogger or New Testament scholar living today wasn't either. So none can claim to know what it is that they experienced. Still, Mike is right to note, again, that those first followers believed. That is what the resurrection claims of the New Testament ask of all Jesus' followers. Sans 'proof' – which, like a corrosive, eventually destroys everything it touches.